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AMERICA'S SECOND LARGEST ETHNIC MINORITY: A HERITAGE DENIED?

By Wolf D. Fuhrig

A few years ago, Alex Haley made a study of his roots in Africa. His book became a best-seller, a television show, and the source for stories in many social studies textbooks. Since few American blacks, all of them descendants of slaves, have been able to find their ancestral homes, Haley's book deserved the attention it received.

American schools have always glorified the roots of those who are of British, Irish, French, Dutch, Scandinavian, Italian, Greek, and Jewish origin. Recently special attention has been given to Blacks, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans. But you will look in vain for a single book in the schools of our country that will give young people an accurate account of the heritage of Americans of German descent.

The media, the schools, and the government simply ignore the fact that, between 1820 and 1965, twenty percent of all immigrants to the U.S., or about eleven million people, came from German-speaking areas of Europe. Since most of them intermarried with other ethnic groups, it is likely that roughly forty percent of all Americans have some German ancestry.

If Americans are to receive an accurate picture of their many roots, the contribution of the millions of our fellow citizens of German stock needs to be given adequate coverage by our media and our schools. That, however, is unlikely to happen as long as our public life from Washington, D.C., to Hollywood, and from the elementary schools to the universities, is dominated by people who are either deliberately unfair or ignorant on many aspects of German history and culture.

What can one expect of people who since 1945 have learned only one overriding fact about Germans, namely that they, as a nation, have "started" two world wars, and that "almost all of them" were Nazis and participated, directly or indirectly, in the killing of six million Jews. Having taught American history in American schools for almost thirty years, I know only too well that most American youngsters associate Germans essentially with war, Hitler, Nazis, and the Holocaust. And many teachers know little more.

We certainly want future generations to know the history of the Nazi movement and its crime but, in a balanced account of the German

heritage, Hitler can only be one of many chapters. To equate Nazis with Germans, as one tends to do, and to present the crimes committed by the Nazi regime as a collective crime of the German people is as false and bigoted as placing the responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus upon the Jews as a group.

It is also erroneous to depict the Germans as more aggressive and war-mongering than other major nations. History shows the German-speaking people involved in substantially fewer acts of aggression against others than the British, the French, and the Russians, for example, whose conquests assembled vast colonial empires.

While Americans of African and Mexican descent are gradually receiving a more truthful treatment of their history by the media and the schools, Americans of German descent have been waiting in vain since the First World War for an end to the distortions and the vilification that pervades references to the German heritage in most popularized books and shows.

The poisoned pens that began their work under President Wilson's administration are still at work thirty-five years after World War II. Our schools either ignore Germany altogether, or they depict the Germans as authoritarian and narrow-minded, with Hitler as the prototype

and fulfillment of German thinking. A political science professor at Northwestern University, William McGovern, wrote a book, "From Luther to Hitler", in which he characterized Luther and most other German intellectual leaders as fore-runners of Hitler. Few American scholars protested this nonsense. When famous philosophers, writers, composers, artists, scientists, and inventors were Germans, American textbooks often ignore this fact as if their national origin was an embarrassment. Our students learn that Karl Marx, the intellectual father of totalitarian communism, was a German product even though he spent most of his life in London; and Hitler is depicted as a typical "Prussian" even though he himself proudly proclaimed himself an Austrian. The composer Friedrich Hindel and the physicist Albert Einstein, however, both undeniably products of German education and culture, are represented in American reference books as English and American respectively, probably because they do not fit the caricature of the authoritarian German.

The distortions of German history in American textbooks are as often due to gross oversimplifications as they are caused by omissions of facts which do not agree with the prevailing prejudices. By taking a few statements or actions out of context,

it becomes easy to make anybody look bad, Luther, Frederick the Great, and Bismarck, for example, are three Germans who, if you believe American textbooks, have done more harm than good. The destruction, however, that such foreign actions as the Thirty Years War, the invasions of Louis XIV, the Napoleonic Wars, and the conferences of Versailles, Yalta, and Potsdam brought upon peace and progress in Germany is of no concern to those who, like Bernadotte Schmitt and William Schirer, find all the villains of modern history between Maas and Menel. Who in America is interested in hearing about the expulsion of 16 million German people from Eastern Europe and the destruction of the culture which they had built there for over 1,000 years? Who ever speaks about the roughly two million people who were murdered in various ways throughout Eastern Europe between 1944 and 1946 only because they spoke the German language? If CBS, NBC, and ABC would ever inquire into the mistakes and crimes committed against Germans, their report about the mistakes and crimes by Germans would look much less biased and propagandistic.

What can Americans of German descent do to counter the tyranny of a misinformed majority? Three options are open:

GOVERNMENT, MEDIA, SCHOOLS

1.) They can emigrate to their country of origin or to another country.
2.) They can simply forget the German aspects of their culture and conform totally to the behavioral expectations of the Anglo-American mainstream.

3.) They can insist on their constitutional rights, maintain their cultural characteristics as they please, and fight the bigots who want to deny them their ethnic identity and heritage.

The government, the media, and the public schools have been, and continue to be, the main agents in the process of destroying America's ethnic pluralism. Thoughtlessly or

deliberately, they are promoting the prejudices and lifestyles favored by the anti-German power elite which controls the media centers, particularly in Washington, New York, and Hollywood. How much longer are we going to tolerate the indiscriminate identification of everything German with such stereotypes as Nazis, Stormtroopers, the Gestapo, the guards of Hogan's Heroes, anti-Semites, Junkers, goosestepping soldiers, and docile burghers. Since these images of the Allied propaganda campaign against Germany continue to predominate in our media's references to, and description of, German culture, they either do not know any better or deliberately

lately falsify the record. Short of outright hate propaganda, the Germanophobes in the entertainment industry use German topics mostly for caricature, ridicule, and horror stories.

In spite of all distortions and omissions in the American media's rendition of German culture and the so-called "German Problem", the relations between the United States and the free part of Germany are today better than at any other time in this century. Ironically, a major cause for this improved atmosphere has been the American presence in Western Germany and Berlin over the past thirty-five years.

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